



SHARP FACTS

Testing for HIV



What is HIV?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. This virus is passed from one person to another through blood-to-blood and sexual contact. In addition, infected pregnant women can pass HIV to their baby during pregnancy or delivery, as well as through breast-feeding. AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. A positive HIV test result does not mean that a person has AIDS. A diagnosis of AIDS is made by a physician using certain clinical criteria (e.g., AIDS indicator illnesses).

How can I tell if I'm infected with HIV?

The only way to determine for sure whether you are infected is to be tested for HIV infection. You cannot rely on symptoms to know whether or not you are infected with HIV. Many people who are infected with HIV do not have any symptoms at all for many years. Similarly, you cannot tell that a person has HIV or AIDS simply by looking at them.

Where can I get tested for HIV infection?

All active duty sailors are tested regularly for HIV. Beneficiaries and civilian employees can obtain testing through their assigned medical care provider. Other places offering testing include local health departments, hospitals, and sites specifically set up to provide HIV testing.

It is important to seek testing at a place that also provides counseling about HIV and AIDS. Counselors can answer any questions you might have about risky behavior and ways you can protect yourself and others in the future. In addition, they can help you understand the meaning of the test results and describe what AIDS-related resources are available in the local area.

For civilians, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National AIDS Hotline can answer questions about testing and can refer you to testing sites in your area. The Hotline numbers are 1-800-342-2437 (English), 1-800-344-7432 (Spanish), or 1-800-243-7889 (TTY).

Consumer-controlled test kits (popularly known as "home test kits") were first licensed in 1997. Although home HIV tests are sometimes advertised through the Internet, currently only the Home Access test is approved by the Food and Drug Administration. (The accuracy of home test kits other than Home Access cannot be verified.) The Home Access test kit can be found at most local drug stores. The testing procedure involves pricking your finger with a special device, placing drops of blood on a specially treated card, then mailing the card in to be tested at a licensed laboratory. Customers are given an identification number to use when phoning for the test results. Callers may speak to a counselor before taking the test, while waiting for the test result, and when getting the result.

How long after a possible exposure should I wait to get tested for HIV?

The tests commonly used to detect HIV infection actually look for antibodies produced by your body to fight HIV. Most people will develop detectable antibodies within 3 months after infection, the average being 25 days. In rare cases, it can take up to 6 months. For this reason, the CDC currently recommends testing 6 months after the last possible exposure (unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex or sharing needles). It would be extremely rare to take longer than 6 months to develop detectable antibodies. It is important, during the 6 months between exposure and the test, to protect yourself and others from further possible exposures to HIV.

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If I test HIV negative, does that mean that my partner is HIV negative also?

No. Your HIV test result reveals only your HIV status. Your negative test result does not tell you whether your partner has HIV.

HIV is not necessarily transmitted every time there is an exposure. Therefore, your taking an HIV test should not be seen as a method to find out if your partner is infected. Testing should never take the place of protecting yourself from HIV infection. If your behaviors are putting you at risk for exposure to HIV, it is important to reduce your risks.

What if I test positive for HIV?

If you test positive for HIV, the sooner you take steps to protect your health, the better. Early medical treatment and a healthy lifestyle can help you stay well. Prompt medical care may delay the onset of AIDS and prevent some life-threatening conditions. There are a number of important steps you can take immediately to protect your health:

- See a doctor, even if you do not feel sick. Try to find a doctor who has experience treating HIV. There are now many drugs to treat HIV infection and help you maintain your health. It is never too early to start thinking about treatment possibilities.
- Have a TB (tuberculosis) test done. You may be infected with TB and not know it. Undetected TB can cause serious illness, but it can be successfully treated if caught early.
- Smoking cigarettes, drinking too much alcohol, or using illegal drugs (such as cocaine) can weaken your immune system. There are programs available that can help you reduce or stop using these substances.

There is much you can do to stay healthy. Learn all that you can about maintaining good health.

Why is CDC recommending that all pregnant women be tested for HIV?

There are now medical therapies available to lower the chance of an HIV-infected pregnant woman passing HIV to her infant before, during, or after birth. ZDV (zidovudine, also known as AZT or Retrovir) is the only drug which has been proven to reduce perinatal transmission. In 1998, the U.S. Public Health Services released updated recommendations for offering antiretroviral therapy to HIV positive pregnant women.

HIV testing and counseling provides an opportunity for infected women to find out if they are infected and to gain access to medical treatment that may help to delay disease progression. For women who are not infected, HIV counseling provides an opportunity to learn important prevention information to reduce the possibility of future exposures.

Where can I get more information?

Your medical care provider should be consulted if you think you may have been exposed to any sexually transmitted disease. CDC provides information through their National AIDS Hotline at (800) 342-AIDS (2437). The Food and Drug Administration provides an on-line listing of approved HIV tests at <http://www.fda.gov/cber/products/testkits.htm>. For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP) Home Page at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

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